

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

The rise of the Indian Writing in English is, at the onset, to be located historically. The first connection that we should be looking at is the introduction of the English language as a medium of instruction in India and the introduction of English literature as a subject in the Universities. Before Indians could write poetry in English, two related preconditions had to be met. First, the English language had to be sufficiently indianised to be able to express the reality of the Indian situation. Secondly, Indians had to be sufficiently Anglicized to use the English language to express themselves. In 1780, India's first newspaper, 'Hicky's Bengal Gazette', was published in English by James Augustus Hicky. In 1817, the Hindu college, which later became Presidency College, the premier educational institution of Bengal, was founded.

Macaulay's *Minute Upon Indian Education* introduced in 1833 provided for the introduction of English as a medium of instruction with the claim that "the English tongue would be the most useful for our native subjects." While presenting his famous minute, Macaulay admitted quite candidly that he had not read any of the Sanskrit and Arabic books and yet did not desist from making such a pronouncement: "...A single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. ...All the historical information which has been collected in the Sanskrit language is less than what may be found in the paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools of England..."

India, thus became a kind of testing ground for the launch of English literature in the classroom at a time when English Universities were still steeped in the Latin and Greek classics. English was, as a result, introduced in educational institutions, Courts and offices thus dislodging the traditional use of Arabic and Sanskrit as a mode of communication and documentation. Lord William Bentinck announced in 1835 that the government would "favour English Language alone" henceforth and would move towards "a knowledge of English literature and Science through the medium of English language alone." The Wood Dispatch of 1854 proclaimed the establishment of the Universities at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta and thereafter made the English language accessible to students, professors and also the officials of Government offices. To begin with the introduction of English at these levels had some interesting repercussions. What is pejoratively called "Babu English" today became the first offspring of the unholy encounter between the British English language and the unwilling Babu. The 'art and craft' and discomfort with which they used the language in the offices in course became a matter of derision. In the arena of literary studies too English began to assert itself. The first Indian novel in English was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* appeared in 1864. This novel was set in a Bengal village. Through a simple domestic story it highlighted the central concern: that of the virtue of renunciation over self-love. Salman Rushdie referring to the same sense of artifice and discomfort of the earliest users of the English language calls this first novel written by an Indian in English a 'dud'. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) who went on to attain a

high stature as a writer produced other novels in his mother tongue, Bengali, of which *Anandmatha* (1882) and *Durgeshnandini* (1890) deserve mention.

The period from 1850 to 1900 is the imitative phase when the Indian poets were romantic poets in the Indian garb or in George Bottomley's words "Matthew Arnold in a saree" or as some derogatively observes "Shakuntala in a mini-skirt". The chief sources of inspiration were the British romantic poets: Wordsworth, Scott, Shelley, Keats, Byron. The period from 1900 to 1947 is the assimilative period when the Indian poets still romantic tried to assimilate the romanticism of the early nineteenth century British poets and the "new" romantics of the decadent period for expressing the consciousness of the Indian renaissance between nationalism and political changes which ultimately led to the attainment of political freedom in 1947.

The first phase of Indian poetry was the period of literary renaissance in India. Derozio's poems, Kasiprasad Ghose's *The Shair or Minstrel and other poems*, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *The Captive Lady*, Manmohan Ghose's *Love Songs and Elegies* are a testimony to the creative upsurge occasioned by the romantic spirit kindled by the literary renaissance. Toru Dutt alone among these romantic poets of the first phase puts an emphasis on India and her heritage by putting into verse a large number of Indian legends. The romantic Toru Dutt is also a predecessor in respect to the use of the tree in verse as demonstrated by "Our Casuarina Tree", a predecessor in respect of childhood memories recalled with nostalgia or regret.

The poets of the second phase, still romantic in spirit were Sarojini Naidu, Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose and Harindranth Chattopadhyaya. The poetic output of these poets was prolific. Romanticism of these Indian poets was fraught with nationalism, spirituality and mysticism. It was therefore different from English romanticism. Indian romanticism widened the poet's vision. While Aurbindo's was the search for the Divine in Man and Tagore's was the quest for the Beautiful in Man and Nature. Both were philosopher poets. Sarojini Naidu's romantic muse underscored the charm and splendor of traditional Indian life and Indian scene. She had a fine ear for verbal melody as she was influenced not only by English poetry but also by the Persian and Urdu poetry.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw a gradual growth of the novel form in English in India. Romesh Chandra Dutt was an important figure writing at that time. He occupied important Government posts before retiring as the Diwan of the Royal Baroda State. He wrote six novels in Bengali, out of which two he translated into English: *The Lake of Palms* (1902) and *The Slave Girl of Agra* (1909). Both these novels were published in London and were hailed as writings with dense plots and vivid characterization. Some other writers of this era include: T. Ramakrishna who wrote *Dive for Death* and Swarna Ghoshal who wrote *The Fatal Garland*. Krupabai Sathianandan wrote *Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) Bal Krishna, *The Love of Kusama* (1910), Sir Joginder Singh, *Nasrin* (1915), Rajam Iyer, *Vasudeo Shastri* (1905) and A. Madhavan in *Thillai Gobindan* (1916). These are all historically valuable as links in this chain that was fast becoming the body of Indian Writing in English.

However one name that stands apart from this body is that of Rabindranath Tagore. It would be inapt to appropriate him as a writer of English because he wrote with equal felicity and grace in Bengali. As a matter of fact he was not known as a writer alone but as an equally accomplished poet, playwright and painter. He was above all a visionary, a man who conceived institutions like Vishwabharati and gave to the world an ingenious model of Education. *The Home and the World* (1919), *The Wreck* (1921) and *Gora* (1923) have all been translated from Bengali to English. However, *Gitanjali* made Tagore a world literary figure fetching for him the highest honour, the Nobel Prize in Literature for the year 1913 and more importantly is considered as a significant ground that provided a spiritual interface between East and West. Written in 1913, it elevated Tagore to a literary immortality.

The following years saw many a story of success in the field of Indian Writing in English. William Walsh, the English critic picked out three of the most famous writers of the literary circuit at that time. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao became the trinity of Indian writing in English. Speaking of The Big Three, Walsh said: *“It is these three writers who defined the area in which the Indian novel was to operate. They established its assumptions; they sketched its main themes, freed the first models of its characters and elaborated its particular logic. Each of them used an easy, natural idiom which was unaffected by the opacity of a British inheritance. Their language has been freed of the foggy taste of Britain and transferred to a wholly new setting of brutal heat and brilliant light.”*

However the three being early representatives of the use of English language in describing an Indian experience a struggle characterized their attempts. The sustained structure of the novel form too added to the arduous nature of representing Indian life in English. Moreover the novel being essentially a Western form, imposed certain limits and also subsequently modified the Indian experience. Rao pointed out in the preface of *Kanthapura*, “One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.” He further adds that even though English is a language of our intellectual make-up it is not that of our emotional make-up.”

Mulk Raj Anand started his career with the novel *Untouchable*. It was a unique work because the convention of Indian works having the highborn and the privileged as central protagonist was broken down. The hero, Bakha is a low caste sweeper boy and the novel is a description of the experiences that he undergoes in one day and as they impinge on his consciousness. The structure of the novel draws extensively from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in the use of stream-of-consciousness technique. Apart from this Western influence (he was also a member of the famous Bloomsbury group of writers in London too) another important quarter, which affected his writing, was the idea of socialistic society as propounded by Mahatma Gandhi. The solution to Indian casteism that was given in *Untouchable* was in accordance with Gandhi’s idea of dignity for the low-born. His other novels, *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940), and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) are also works with a reformative agenda.

Unlike the flamboyant Anand with Western influence was the unpretentious and unassuming R.K. Narayan whose first book was *Swami and Friends* (1935) He created the fictitious region of Malgudi – a small South Indian town – “a blend of oriental and pre-1914.” The characters are the small time residents of this town and go about their quotidian concerns. However out of this daily humdrum emerge certain life-affirming, brilliant flashes that the writer captures for the reader. Except for his work, waiting for Mahatma, which features the Quit India Movement of 1942, current political issues do not figure in his writings. *The Dark Room* (1938) is the story of Savitri married to a callous husband Ramani. *The Guide* (1958) was one of his most appreciated works. It tells the story of Raju the guide and his love for Rosie whom he first meets as a client’s wife.

Raja Rao has produced four novels and a collection of short stories till date. *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) and *Comrade Kirrilov* (1976) and *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947- short story collection). *Kanthapura* is the story of a South Indian town that is affected by the Civil Disobedience Movement. What is interesting about the book, however is the narrative technique used by Rao. The story is told through the voice of the old woman inhabitant of the village who uses the structure of the traditional folk epic, the puranas. The book fuses the spirit of the traditional religious faith of the village with that of the Nationalist Movement.